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A Little Less Misunderstanding

What Christians Don't Understand About Neopaganism

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Q: Are you a witch?

A: That's actually a tricky question to answer, so let me go about it in a round-about way. What I am is a Neopagan. Neopaganism is a beautiful, complex religion that is not in opposition to Christianity in any way - just different. However, some of the people that the Catholic church burned as "witches" were people who practiced the same things that I do. In identification with them and the suffering that they went through, some of us (Neopagans) call ourselves witches. One expert, P.E.I. Bonewits, says that there are actually several kinds of groups who call themselves "witches." Some are people whose ancestors were the village healers, herbalists, midwives, and such, many of whom had (or were ascribed to have) mental, psychic, or magical powers, which were passed down through the family in the form of oral tradition, and Bonewits calls them "Traditional Witches." Some are people who have deliberately used the term to oppose themselves to Christianity, are practicing "Satanists," and practice (deliberately) most of the practices invented by the Inquisitors. Bonewits calls them "Gothic" or "Neo-Gothic Witches." Of a different kind are some radical feminist groups, who call themselves witches because they believe that the original Inquisition was primarily anti-female; some of these also practice magic, many of them do not - Bonewits calls them "Feminist Witches." But the vast majority of modern witches are harmless people who worship God in many forms, including the Lord of the Dance, the Lady, and the Mother Earth. These are the people that Bonewits (and I) call "Neopagan Witches" - and this is what I am. I hope that this helps more than it confuses.

Q: Are you a devil worshipper?

A: I'm tempted to just say, "No!" and leave it at that, but that probably isn't enough. Devil worship (including Satanism) is really a Christian heresy. (If you don't believe me, ask an expert - say, any well-read pastor or theology professor.) In order to worship Satan, you have to believe in him - and there are no references to Satan outside of the Christian Bible. So to be a Satanist or a devil worshipper, you have to believe in the accuracy of the Christian Bible, then identify yourself with God's Enemy, proclaim that you are "evil," and then try to "fight against Jesus" or similar

nonsense. Neopagans do not accept the Christian Bible as a source of truth. As a source of some beautiful poetry, sometimes, or as a source of myth, but not as a source of truth. Emphatically, we do not believe that God has an Opposite, an evil being trying to destroy God, the world, man, or whatever. So it is nonsensical to say that Neopagans worship Satan. Of course, many people insist that any god other than JHVH/Jesus (and his other Biblical names) is a demon or an illusion created by Satan. Well, you're welcome to believe that if you like - but over half of the world's population is going to be unhappy at you. Jews and followers of Islam are just as confident that they worship the True God as you are, and resent being called devil worshippers. So do I.

Q: What do Neopagans believe about God?

A: Neopaganism is a new religion with very, very old roots. It harks back to the first religions that man ever practiced (based on the physical evidence). Neopagans worship a variety of symbols from the Old Religions - the practices of the ancient Celts, the Greeks, the Egyptians, the Romans - and differ with each other over what those symbols really represent. What I (and many others) believe is that they are all aspects of God (or maybe, the Gods) - some kind of beautiful, powerful, and loving being or force that ties all of life together and is the origin of all miracles - including miracles such as written language, poetry, music, art

Q: Do Neopagans have a Bible?

A: Not most of us. The closest analogue would be a witch's Book of Shadows, which is a sort of notebook of legends, poetry, history, and magic ritual which is copied by every newly-initiated witch, then added to. But on the whole, even a Book of Shadows isn't what Christians think of as a Bible. It's not infallible (couldn't be, they've been brought to us via hastily-copied texts under trying circumstances), it doesn't prescribe a specific code of morality (except for a few general guidelines), and it doesn't claim to be dictated by God - except for a few, debatable parts. Those of us who aren't witches don't even have that much. Neopaganism is a religious system that relies more on the individual than on the Book or the Priest. One of the principal beliefs of Neopaganism is that no one, not Pope nor Priest nor Elder, has the right to interfere with your relationship to God. Learn from whomever you want, and pray to whatever name means the most to you.

Q: Did you say magic? Do Neopagans believe in the occult?

A: Cringe. What a badly worded question - but I hear it all the time. Neopagans as a rule don't "believe in the occult" - we practice magic. Magic is simply a way to focus the mental abilities that you were born with, and use them to change the world in positive ways. Magic can also be mixed with worship; in which case it differs very little from Christian prayer.

Q: But I thought that you said that you weren't a demon-worshipper?

A: That's right. Magic and demonology are two different things. Magic you also know as "psychic powers" or "mentallics" or even as "the power of positive thinking" - in essence, the magical world view holds that "reality" is mostly a construct of the human mind, and as such, can be altered by the human mind. That's all there is to it.

Q: How do you become a Neopagan?

A: In a very real sense, nobody every "becomes" a Neopagan. There are no converts, as no conversion is necessary. Neopaganism is an attitude towards worship, and either you have it or you don't. My case is not atypical. All of my life, I have been fascinated by the old mythologies. I have always found descriptions of the Greek Gods fascinating. If I had any religious beliefs as a child, it was that somewhere, there was a God, and many people worship Him, but I had no idea what His name was. I set out to find Him, and through an odd combination of circumstances, I because convinced that his Name was Jesus. But seven years later, I had to admit to myself that Whoever God is, he answers non-Christians' prayers as well as those in the name of Jesus. In either case, true miracles are rare. In both cases, the one praying has a devout experience with God. After searching my soul, I admitted that I could not tell that I was better off than when I believed in the Old Gods. And in the mean time, I had found out that other people also loved the Old Gods - and that they call themselves Neopagans. When I realized that what I believed was little or no

different that what they believed, I called myself a Neopagan, too. The common element for nearly all of us is that nearly all of us already believed these things, before we found out that anyone else did. "Becoming" a pagan is never a conversion. It's usually a home-coming. No one ever "brainwashed" me. I finally relaxed, and stopped struggling against my own self.

Q: I've heard about witches holding orgies and such. Do you?

A: No, that sort of thing doesn't appeal to me. Most of the crap that you've heard about "witch orgies" is nonsense made up by the National Enquirer to sell magazines. But I shouldn't be flippant about this, because it underlies a serious question - what kind of morality do Neopagans hold to?

> "Eight words the Wiccan Rede fulfill:
> An it harm none, do what thou will!"

from an old Book of Shadows

That about sums it all up. Neopaganism teaches that it is harmful to yourself (and dangerous) to harm others. It also teaches that trying to impose your moral standards on somebody else's behavior is (at least) foolish - and probably dangerous, as you run some serious chance of hurting that person. Perhaps in a sense Neopagans don't have morality, for as R. A. Wilson said, "There are no commandments because there is no Commander anywhere," but Neopagans do have ethics - standards for behavior based on honor and mutual benefit.

Q: I saw on the news that Neopagans use a star in a circle as their emblem. Isn't that a Satanic symbol?

A: A pentacle (that's what it's called) is a Satanic symbol in precisely same sense that the cross is a Nazi symbol. The German National Socialist Party used an equal-armed cross with four flags attached to it as their emblem. (Yes, I know - that's a swastika. Well, before the Nazis made the word common knowledge, people just called it a "bent cross" - it's an old heraldic symbol, and it means the same thing that a normal cross does). That doesn't make the Nazis good Christians, and it doesn't make Christians into Nazis. In the same sense, Satanists (and some rock groups) use a type of pentacle as their emblem. That doesn't make them Neopagans, nor does it mean that Neopagans are Satanists (or even rock-and-rollers).

Q: Are Neopagans opposed to Christianity?

A: Some Neopagans are ex-Christians, and I'm not going to deny that some of them have a grudge against the Church because of what they perceived as attempts to control their minds. Further, many Neopagans are suspicious of the Church, because it was in the name of Jesus Christ that nine million of our kind were murdered. Neopagans are opposed to anyone who uses force to control the minds of others. Does that include you? If not, then it means that Neopagans as such are not opposed to you. Do you work for the benefit of mankind, are you respectful to the Earth? Then it makes us allies, whether or not either of us wants to admit it.

There are many other misconceptions in the popular mind about the Neopagan religion. Unless you've studied it, read about it from sympathetic sources, then you really don't know anything about Neopagan history, beliefs, practices, customs, art, science, culture, or magic. But it would take several entire books to teach you, and I already fear that I will be accused of trying to win converts (despite what I've said above). If you are curious and willing to learn, try some of the following books:

- Margot Adler, Drawing Down the Moon
- Starhawk, The Spiral Dance
- P.E.I. Bonewits, Real Magic

- Stewart Farrar, What Witches Do

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Last modified: August 19 2018 14:53:01